

Cocoa Beach and beyond

Below you may find few pieces of advice on how to spend your free time in central Florida before or after your busy working week of our first ICCMC conference.

We will focus this informal guide mostly on outdoor, sightseeing or active past time activities.

You may inquire about more formal – or more touristy if you prefer that – activities at your hotel lobby desk.

We organized this section more or less in geographical order, pointing directions of travel North, South and West. If you are going East, you need a plane or at least a boat.

All driving times and distances are approximate (but, hopefully, accurate).

What to do right at the Cocoa Beach

Manatee Sanctuary Park

http://www.cityofcapecanaveral.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B61D4D3CB-D4FE-428A-9F29-B26957B5B809%7D

10 acres, mostly grassy area, some palms, and trees for shade, boardwalk. Close to Rt. A1A bridge and Radisson Resort. Water is usually calm, but not suitable for swimming. The possibility of seeing manatees are very remote.

Cherie Down Park

<http://www.brevardfl.gov/ParksRecreation/Central/CherieDown>

Small beach with a boardwalk. Good for sunbathing, surfing and occasional swimming.

Cocoa Beach Pier

<https://www.westgatedestinations.com/florida/cocoa-beach/cocoa-beach-pier>

It is a sizeable pier with several restaurants, eateries, etc.

Lori Wilson Park

<http://www.brevardfl.gov/ParksRecreation/Central/LoriWilson>

and Sidney Fisher Park

<http://www.cityofcocoa-beach.com/Facilities/Facility/Details/Sidney-Fischer-Park-30>

These parks are fine for a short stroll on sand, sunrise viewing, occasional sea-dipping if waves are cooperative. Lori Wilson Park has good showers.

What to do North of the Cocoa Beach

Within 1 hour drive from the Cocoa Beach

- Cape Canaveral Visitor Center surroundings. You may find plenty of alligators all around if you are happened to get there at the right time, which are cold months of the year or mornings at the rest of the year. Even the ditches along the NASA Causeway, NASA Parkway, and Courtenay Parkway hold sizeable alligators population. Enjoy watching.

Orlando Wetlands Park

<http://www.cityoforlando.net/wetlands/>

Great place to watch alligators and birds.

Canaveral Marshes Conservation Trailhead

Long hike along the marches, otherwise you may hire airboats at <http://www.airboatridesatmidway.com/>

Flagler Trail <http://www.alltrails.com/trail/us/florida/flagler-trail-econ-river-little-big-econ-state-forest> and Little Big Econ River Forest <http://floridahikes.com/florida-trail-little-big-econ-state-forest>.

Offer good examples of an unspoiled central Florida as it was hundreds of years ago. Nice trails, possibility to see a lot of wildlife.

Chain of Lakes Park

<http://www.brevardfl.gov/ParksRecreation/North/ChainOfLakes/>

It is more of a formal park but offers a good opportunity to see wildlife if you visit the park at sunrise or on sunset.

A triangle area in between Rt. 402, Max Brewer Memorial Highway and Kennedy Parkway north of the Cape Canaveral launch area presents good bird watching opts at Mosquito Lagoon. This area is located just north of Cape Canaveral shuttle landing strip, which offers some unobstructed views toward shuttle launch facility there (if you don't want to pay to get to Cape Canaveral). The area also tends to host a large permanent flock of beautiful pink ibises.

Just 5 kilometers to the North of the area, at Indian River Inlet (east of Courtenay Parkway bridge) right by the east side of the bridge on a Kennedy Parkway, is a Manatees Observation Deck <http://floridahikes.com/manatee-observation-deck>. The place provides the best opportunity to spot manatees in a Cocoa Beach area. If you walk by the shore either left or right of the bridge, you may spot manatee feeding on sea grass just a few meters from you. Usually, manatees are present here from Fall to Spring; some may still stay here in April.

Merritt Island

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Merritt_Island/

Great place to watch manatees, alligators, and birds at the right time of the day (mornings and evenings).

Within 2 hours drive North from the Cocoa Beach

Wekiwa State Park

<https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Wekiwa-springs>

It is nice fresh water springs (water temperature is 22 Celsius all year round, as it is at all Florida freshwater springs), swimming, tubing, canoeing, hiking is available here. It might be a bit crowded, especially on the weekend.

Blue Spring State Park

<https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Blue-Spring>

Very nice park, although it might be pretty crowded if manatees are present. It is the best place in the world to see manatees in winter, but the manatees usually are descending back to rivers and then to an ocean sometimes during springtime, when the weather is getting hotter.

However, if there are no manatees there, the spring is a really good place for tubing, swimming and snorkeling and the river Wekiwa is good water artery for canoeing. Usually, the number of fishes in the spring is astounding. Water is crystal clear and, again, it is always at constant 22 degrees Celsius year-round.

Ocala National Forest:

Ocala National Forest <http://www.stateparks.com/ocala.html> is the largest forest in Florida. Here you may do hiking, biking, driving through the forest via pristine deserted roads, checking inner lakes and forest openings. Soft payment on secondary roads is usually in a pretty good condition year-round except after heavy rains; two-wheel cars can go almost anywhere, however, use your common sense and good judgment.

Juniper Springs State Park

Nice park (steep entrance fee is around \$20). Trails are many and in good shape, easy walking. Park offers one of the best freshwater canoeing in Florida along the very intimate and a picturesque creek <http://www.juniper-springs.com/recreation/>. Easy canoe rentals. Come early, because the trip is about 3 hours floating in a very relaxed pace. Highly recommended.

Alexander Springs is large, yet pretty secluded snorkeling spot; there are good seasonal (winter and spring, in summer the river

overgrows with aquatic vegetation) options for swimming. Kayak hire is here <http://paddleflorida.net/alexander-springs-paddle.htm>

Silver Glen Springs usually holds most fishes of all Florida springs with nice alligator gar population, snorkeling in winter and spring is very rewarding here, keep your underwater camera ready <http://www.floridasprings.org/visit/map/silver-glen-springs/>

Silver Springs State Park is the only place in the USA where you can see wild monkeys (macaque rhesus). They are not very difficult to spot when you are on the river https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34496-d108805-r191035864-Silver_Springs_River-Ocala_Florida.html.

You may rent a variety of boats at <http://www.silversprings.com/>, otherwise, drive to the State Park entrance (recommended) via the park entrance road that leads to the campground and museum <http://www.floridasprings.org/visit/map/silver%20springs/>. The park has trails and kayak and canoe rentals. Some half a mile walking is required to get to the boat launch spot from the parking (rental kayaks/canoes are waiting for you on the shore). However, it's a very nice walk with good options to see armadillos along the trail.

What to do west of the Cocoa Beach

Within a 1hour drive *from the Cocoa Beach*:

A good place to cool down is <http://www.spacecoasticeplex.com/>. You can skate there; fee isn't steep. However, skates here – and, generally, anywhere in the USA – are of a slightly poorer quality compare to what you usually get in Europe.

Twister Airboat Rides <http://www.twisterairboatrides.com/> is an airboat company, the location is convenient. However, the

scenery here is not as good as at other similar locations half an hour further west.

Split Oak Forest Mitigation Park is a good place to walk around and enjoy nature early or later in a day
<http://myfwc.com/viewing/recreation/wmas/lead/split-oak-forest>.
Not recommended for mid-day stroll due to its proximity to the city.

The Moss Park nearby offers nice freshwater swimming beach
<http://www.orangecountyfl.net/cultureparks/parks.aspx?m=dtlvw&d=29#.WNGHKm8rJaQ> as well as some short nature trails.

"Forever Florida" <https://www.foreverflorida.com/> offers zip-lines, thrill park, horse riding, and pretty funny guided tours on the board of huge all-terrain trucks.

For more formal tourist gator place one may go to Gatorland
<http://www.gatorland.com/>. It is the "Alligator Capital of the World and Orlando's Best Half Day Attraction" as they name themselves. Maybe it is not a nature-lovers place, but nevertheless, it is a fun venue to visit, Disney-like alligator encounters are guaranteed (alligators are real).

Shingle Creek Regional Park is a very nice creek right at the city limits <http://www.floridasnaturalwonders.com/bucket-list/shingle-creek-regional-park/>. Despite being close to Disneyworld and other Orlando attractions, the place retains a pretty nice "semi-wild" look. You can rent a kayak, canoe or even a paddle board here and float the creek; it looks nice and pristine.

Boggy Creek Airboat Rides <http://bcairboats.com/>. The name says it all. It is an airboat adventure, pretty popular with tourists, yet it is fun to do it if you don't mind somewhat noisy water rides.

Similar to previous activities can be found at the Wild Florida Air Boats <https://wildfloridairboats.com/>, however, plus to the airboat rides (which are not that intense than at location

mentioned above) they have a nice small zoo, where you can touch different animals if you are so inclined, petting zoo and buggy rides. We'd recommend booking your trip here in advance; this place is popular.

Lake Kissimmee State Park is another good place to walk, hike or stroll through the typical Florida wetlands not much spoiled by close- be city <https://www.floridastateparks.org/photos/Lake-Kissimmee>. The have few nature trails with a good opportunity to spot wildlife. Check if canoe rentals are operational there. Another good airboat site is just a few minutes' drive away from here <http://www.alligatorcoveairboatnaturetours.com/>.

Within a good two hours drive from the Cocoa Beach:

Rainbow River <https://www.floridastateparks.org/park/Rainbow-Springs>. Drive to Dunnellon, Florida. Rainbow River considered being the clearest and the most picturesque river in Florida. Best to experience it by hiring a pontoon boat or canoe (remember that it is a noticeable current here) to float the river, it's one of the best rivers in a state, water is clear, and banks are nice, even if they are mostly built up with houses.

Homosassa Springs State Park. It is one of the best wildlife parks in Florida, pretty informative yet rather informal. You even may have an option to see manatees here in a middle season, which is a rarity for the rest of inner Florida in hotter months of the year. If you are very adventurous, you can swim with manatees at your risk. Park your car outside the side-walk park entrance on Spring Cove Rd., walk couple hundred meters east, get your mask and snorkel and swim toward the park: manatees should be there. Otherwise, you should park at the park's visitor center <https://www.floridastateparks.org/park-history/Homosassa-Springs> and enjoy a short boat ride to the park and a small zoo there.

At Crystal River NWA it is also a possibility to swim with manatees [http://www.floridasprings.org/visit/map/crystal-river/Chassahowitzka NWR](http://www.floridasprings.org/visit/map/crystal-river/Chassahowitzka%20NWR) or Citrus Wildlife MA are funny places to walk mainly in winter. The woods are predominantly pine forest with a citrus undergrow. Wild oranges and mandarins can be picked here in season in abundance; they are the escapees from the nearby plantations and are pretty tasty in juices, not so good to eat fresh. Unfortunately, now it is not a season for citrus, but the forests are not bad at any time of the year.

Excellent hike along the unspoiled beach is at Honeymoon Island SP [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honeymoon Island State Park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honeymoon_Island_State_Park). Park your car at the northernmost part of the Gulf (west)-facing parking lot, and hike to the north along the shore to the very northernmost tip of the island. Swim right there (may do that naked, it is usually a totally deserted part of the island). The place is remote, nice, and has plenty of birdlife and shells there. It is about 2 miles hike one way, but sand is hard and pleasant to walk on.

The Tampa/St.Petersburg are the furthest destination from the Cocoa Beach, 2.5 hours drive one way;

Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg <http://thedali.org/> is very good! That's not too far from Tampa area and near all of the west coast beaches!

One of the best bridges in the USA (and in the world) is Sunshine Skyway bridge (on I-275 south of St. Petersburg). It's fun to drive on or look at while swimming or picnicking at Fort de Soto County Park http://www.pinellascounty.org/park/05_ft_desoto.htm.

Keep in mind that Florida West Coast beaches are calmer, cleaner, more pristine, more picturesque and overall much nicer than Florida East Coast beaches.

What to do South of Cocoa Beach

Within an hour drive *from the Cocoa Beach*:

Brevard Zoo <https://brevardzoo.org/>. It's a good organized, large and clean Zoo. You can zip-line, ride the train and even kayak through the zoo; it is quite a unique experience (kayaks are for rent, guided).

St. Sebastian River State Park offers several good nature trails http://www.stateparks.com/st_sebastian_river_preserve_state_park_in_florida.html. During the winter months, manatees are almost guaranteed to see along the St. Sebastian River; some manatees might be present till early April. It is also not a bad place for fishing. Some very good fishing and beach activities are at Sebastian Inlet State Park <http://sebastianinlet.com/>; here one can rent a pontoon, skiff or kayak for fishing or pleasure excursion.

Within two hours drive from the Cocoa Beach:

Ft. Pierce Inlet State Park offers a lot of leisurely activities for anyone who loves playing with sand and water http://www.stateparks.com/fort_pierce_inlet_state_park_in_florida.html. The large jetties constructed of huge boulders makes this place unique. When the weather is calm, the places close to the jetties are probably the northernmost area in all USA East Coast beaches where you can snorkel in a clear water and see a lot of tropical fishes, even some soft and hard corals.

The US Navy SEALs training base established here at 1943, and the museum <https://www.navysealmuseum.org/> dedicated to the history of this combat force is sitting on the former training base grounds. Exhibitions are good but might be too graphic if you are not a military-inclined person.

- Savannas Preserve State Park provides hands-on experience with carefully preserved and typical South Florida wetland habitats <http://www.friendsofsavannas.org/>. Park has a lot of trails, with good mapping. Fishing for bass in the park is excellent. Guided kayak tours are not bad, too.

West Palm Beach is more or less an East Coast gateway to a Southern Florida. It has a lot to offer, here are few notable outdoor-related activities:

If you like to kayak, canoe or bike through the nice wilderness area, the Canoe Outfitters Florida are probably one of the best (or the best) <http://www.canoeoutfittersofflorida.com/> outfitters in the whole state. Good quality boats and bikes are for rent. Would highly recommend that for a true water aficionados.

Busch Wildlife Sanctuary <http://www.buschwildlife.org/> is one of a few places where you can see real Florida wildlife in an informal zoo-like environment. The place is well worth visiting if you like animals.

Lion Country Safari is one of the best safari parks in the USA <https://www.lioncountrysafari.com/attractions/drive-through-safari/>.

We presume that everyone knows everything about Cape Canaveral Space Center <https://www.kennedyspacecenter.com/> and Disneyworld.

However, at a risk of being too precise, we will remind you few things about the two world-known venues.

Cape Canaveral is an operational facility https://www.nasa.gov/centers/kennedy/about/information/visitor_faq.html. Check with current launch schedules and purchase your tickets to Kennedy Space Center in advance. Daily admission for adults is \$50, and the price is well justifiable.

Disneyworld Orlando is an overwhelmingly huge complex of parks comprises of nine independent Disney entertainment venues <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/> plus several independent, interesting entertainments like Universal Studios <https://ww2.universalorlando.com/web/en/us/index.html> and Sea World Orlando <https://seaworldparks.com/en/seaworld-orlando/>. All of the parks are huge. You are rarely able to visit more than two parks a day, so one need at least five days to visit whole Disneyland. Do you need to do that? Unlikely. Some parks are more boring than others; some are similar to others. Here are our suggestions in case you want to go there:

Kid's favorite:

Disney Magic Kingdom

<https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/magic-kingdom/>.

This park tends to have long lines at most of the attraction, come prepared for a boring waiting time in line.

The park also offers one of the best fireworks of all of the parks at Disneyworld. One of the best places to see the fireworks is by the lagoon near Adventureland there, not far from funnel cake stand.

Adult's favorite:

Epcot <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/epcot/>.

Fireworks and laser show in the evening is well on par with the Magic Kingdom, and it's most sophisticated from all Disneyworld fireworks. Best if you find a space right by the water to see the night laser show - it's impressive.

Animal lover's favorite is Animal Kingdom Theme Park

<https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/animal-kingdom/>

The park is a good mixture of a quality zoo and entertainment. Water rides there are fun, expect to get wet instantly. Safari drive is good, too.

Useful tip: after entering the park, check schedules of all shows you are interested in (Safari, rides, etc.), then run to the show entrances and get an entrance ticket (they are free but are assigning for a specific time, you have to pick your time carefully). Tickets to the safari and the rides tend to run short, plan ahead to avoid unpleasantly surprised.

Water lover's favorite:

Blizzard Beach

<https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/blizzard-beach/>

It is a nice park and a good relaxation venue after a visit to any of the larger parks. We recall pretty much for sure they rent swimwear and towels, but you might have your own, maybe.

Adrenaline rush lover's favorites:

Hollywood Studios

<https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/destinations/hollywood-studios/>

or Universal Studios

<https://ww2.universalorlando.com/web/en/us/index.html>

These two parks are usually the most crowded of any. Plan your visit accurately if you want to see everything there.

And, finally, our favorite park (along with the Animal Kingdom and Epcot) is Sea World

<https://seaworldparks.com/en/seaworld-orlando/>

If you like animals, fishes and birds you'll enjoy the venue.